



## CHAPTER 2

**Key Milestones in the ROK Political Development  
and Historical Significance of the  
2002 Presidential Election***Ilpyong J. Kim*

Political development in the Republic of Korea may be discussed and understood in the context of presidential elections. Political scientists study political development in order to discern and explain the stages of change in the structure of government. For development theorists, this implies that human society and government become more complex over time, passing through successive stages. The study of political development can also be understood as the study of evolution of structures of the state in relation to the changes occurring in the economic and social dimension of group life. Political development takes several stages of development toward nation-state form: party systems emerge; government functions proliferate; the general population becomes more participatory.<sup>41</sup>

The argument of Seymour Martin Lipset is that social requisites such as economic development constitute conditions, not causes, for the development of democracy.<sup>42</sup> Democracy is a balance between consensus and conflict. The main challenge for democracy is to integrate the workers into the legitimate body

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<sup>41</sup> For details, see *The Oxford Dictionary of Politics of the World*.

<sup>42</sup> See Lipset, Martin Seymour, 1959, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53 (1), pp. 69-105, and Lipset, Martin Seymour, 1994, "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited: 1993 Presidential Address," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 59 (1), pp.1-22.

politic. This chapter will address the issues of transition from a military dictatorship to democracy.

## **Korean Politics in Historical Perspective**

The Republic of Korea was established in 1948, three years after the United States and the Soviet Union divided the Korean peninsula in the waning days of World War II. During the next four decades, South Korea's military rulers crushed left-wing dissent and kept the country on a virtual war footing in response to the threat from Communist North Korea. Subsequently, the military regimes implemented full-scale industrialization and modernization programs that transformed a poor, agrarian society into the world's eleventh-largest economy.

South Korea's democratic transition began in 1987, when military dictator Chun Doo-hwan gave in to the widespread student demands, backed by the general population, that his successor to be chosen in a direct presidential election. During the military regime, the president had been elected by a small electoral college appointed by the military rulers.

The political manipulation of the electoral process can be traced back to the first president of the Republic. In 1952, Syngman Rhee wanted to change the constitutional system so that he could serve a second term, but the opposition party dominated the National Assembly at that time, which limited his freedom of action. His only option was to amend the constitution, allowing the general public, instead of the National Assembly, to elect the president thereafter.

The National Assembly members opposed to Syngman Rhee's second term countered this effort by attempting a constitutional change that would abolish the president's office altogether in favor of a parliamentary cabinet system. In response, President

Rhee declared martial law in 1952 and had a large number of National Assemblymen arrested on treason charges.

Under martial law, President Rhee moved ahead with his constitutional amendment requiring direct presidential election by the people rather than by the National Assembly. With the support of the pro-Syngman Rhee members of the National Assembly, he was able to win a second term. However, public opinion was opposed to the heavy-handed tactics of President Rhee, and voter turnout at the second presidential election held on August 5, 1952, was the lowest in the constitutional history of South Korea.<sup>43</sup>

The third constitutional crisis erupted when Syngman Rhee's party attempted to extend the president's term of office to a lifetime position in the fourth presidential election held on March 15, 1960, which the ruling Liberal Party rigged. Widespread public outrage and student protests clearly demonstrated that the Korean people were against any extension of presidential power. The student protests in particular, railing against the injustice in the electoral system and the electoral fraud, led to the downfall of Syngman Rhee's government in May 1960.

In the wake of the May 1960 crisis of authority and legitimacy, a new constitutional system was instituted with a parliamentary cabinet. The opposition party, which tried so hard to curtail the presidential dictatorship, finally succeeded in creating a system under which the prime minister was the chief executive officer and the president functioned as the symbolic head-of-state. Thus the parliamentary system of government was inaugurated in 1960, following the general election in the National Assembly.

However, the parliamentary democracy did not last long. A military coup in May 1961 put an abrupt end to the South Korean

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<sup>43</sup> See Chapter One in this volume for details.

nascent democratic experiment. Major General Park Chung Hee emerged as the coup leader and carried out radical changes in governmental, economic, and social systems. Dramatic transformation of the country during the two decades of military dictatorship brought about rapid industrialization at the expense of freedom and democracy. Military leaders believed that democracy was nothing but a luxury and that individual freedom and human rights should be curtailed or suppressed for the sake of rapid economic development.

### **Military Rule and Economic Development**

When the military seized power in 1961, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in Asia and heavily dependent on the U.S. military and economic largesse. Of the \$4.5 billion in combined military and economic aid that South Korea received from the U.S. in the two decades following World War II, only a third was economic aid. Specifically, from 1945 to 1964, South Korea received \$1.5 billion in economic aid, which in today's currency exceeds \$10 billion. Yet South Korea was as poor in 1961 as it was in 1945.

It was less developed economically than North Korea and remained so until early 1970. The military leadership in the South was determined to catch up with the North economically, despite the fact that the United States began to curtail its economic aid to the South and eventually phased it out completely in 1964.

The Park Chung Hee government was determined to rebuild the national economy first. General Park launched a series of five-year economic development plans implementing an export-oriented development strategy designed to attract foreign capital and earn foreign currency for investment in domestic industry. With no track-record in industry and no collateral to speak of, it was very difficult to borrow money from international financial institutions. However, by the mid-1960s Korea began to export

manufactured goods. The main products for export were textile goods, plywood, and wigs. Exports of manufactured goods reached \$100 million by 1964, and \$1 billion by 1970.

From 1962 to 1987, the Korean economy grew handsomely at an average annual rate of 8.4 percent. Consequently, the international community began to recognize Korea as one of the outstanding newly industrializing countries. Many studies on the modernization and economic development in the 1970s and 1980s portray the rapid industrialization in South Korea as a good example of a developmental dictatorship. But did this rapid economic development provide the prerequisite for political development toward democracy? What is the relationship between economic development and political development toward democracy?

Political scientists and development theorists took part in a heated debate on these issues in the 1960s. Seymour Martin Lipset, in his seminal article on "Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy" concluded that economic development is a prerequisite for political democracy.<sup>44</sup> Milton Friedman argued that development of capitalism encouraged the spread of political freedom.<sup>45</sup> Robert A. Dahl argued that the higher the level of socioeconomic development of a country and the more decentralized its economy, the more likely it is to have a competitive political regime, or polyarchy.<sup>46</sup> Political leaders of developing countries, including General Park Chung Hee, subscribed to Lipset's theory and carried out a series of

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<sup>44</sup> See Lipset, Martin Seymour, 1959, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53 (1), pp. 69-105.

<sup>45</sup> Friedman, Milton, *Capitalism and Freedom*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1962.

<sup>46</sup> See Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1971, p. 64.

development plans in the 1960s and 1970s. However, neither civil society nor political democracy developed in South Korea to accompany the impressive economic growth that occurred during the decades of military dictatorship.

While some scholars investigated the influence of economic development on the political system, Robert T. Holt and John E. Turner reversed the hypothesis. In their book, *The Political Basis of Economic Development: An Exploration in Comparative Political Analysis* (1966), they argued that the political system has an impact on economic development. Against the backdrop of these theoretical debates on the relationship between economic and political development, how should scholars of comparative politics and developmental studies assess the role of economic development plans under the military dictatorship of South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s?

Koreans' ardent desire for democracy appears to be embedded in the contemporary belief systems of many Korean elites. Koreans are highly educated people and possess a strong work ethic -- possibly a legacy of traditional Confucian culture. From the Choson dynasty to the present, Confucian political culture has influenced the Korean people. It has played an important role in the development of the authoritarian communist political system in North Korea under Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. To better understand the Northern and Southern political systems from a comparative perspective, one should bear in mind the historical legacy of Confucian political culture in the two Koreas.

### **The 1987 Political Crisis and Democracy Movement**

Rapid economic development, industrialization, urbanization, and overall modernization of Korean society in the 1960s-1970s generated growing demand for political liberalization and democracy among South Koreans in the 1980s. The level of economic achievement may require a commensurately more

liberal, pluralistic, and democratic political system. The demand for political liberalization was particularly strong among a new generation of Koreans who did not have first-hand experience of either the Korean War or Korea's poverty in the 1950s and 1960s. Millions of students and intellectuals took to the street in protest against human rights abuses and in support of political liberalization. Their demands rapidly began to spread to the entire society in the form of a democracy movement.

South Korea's economic success and cultural development created political tensions and unrest, which reached the boiling point in 1987. President Chun Doo-hwan and other military rulers, who controlled the government at that time, were unable to accommodate popular demands for democratization and liberalization. Korea had a long tradition of protest against repressive regimes and military rule; during the military regime of Park Chung Hee in the 1960s and 1970s, Korean students began to challenge the legitimacy of the military rule and organized street demonstrations. The military regime frequently declared marshal law and arrested a large number of students and intellectuals, jailing them and subsequently banning them from any social or political activities.

Following the assassination of President Park Chung-hee by the then Korean CIA director in May 1979, the thaw in the Spring of Seoul opened a window of opportunity for political liberalization and democracy movement. However, the new military clique led by Major General Chun Doo-hwan seized power in a surprise *coup d'etat* on December 12, 1980. The new military regime was even harsher than the Park Chung Hee government, and thus the garrison-state mentality prevailed in the period of 1980-1987. Human rights were suppressed, freedom of press was curtailed, and all forms of political activity were banned. The student movement and various opposition groups went underground. Although popular resistance to the military dictatorship continued, the democracy movement was temporarily curtailed.

By 1987, however, Chun Doo Hwan's iron-hand dictatorship was unable to hold back the tide of popular discontent and finally made concessions before being overthrown by the democracy movement. These concessions to the opposition demands for political liberalization included presidential elections by popular vote and guarantees of the freedom of press and assembly. The 1987 crisis forced the military regime to give in to popular demands for democratization and political freedom. The constitution was drastically amended. The revised constitution requires that the president be elected by popular vote and limits his service to a single five-year term.

However, the process of political development following the 1987 crisis was quite different from what ordinary citizens had expected. As stipulated, the presidential election took place on December 18, 1987, but its outcome was disappointing to those who fought for democracy: the winner was the ruling Democratic Justice Party candidate Roh Tae-woo, a retired army general and a close associate of former President Chung Doo-hwan.

Why did the democratic opposition lose? It was due largely to a three-way split in the opposition democratic camp. If the three opposition party leaders, Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Kim Jong-pil, had succeeded in creating a coalition to put forth a single candidate for president, they would have easily defeated the ruling party candidate. Although the ruling party candidate, Roh Tae-woo, received only 36.6% of the popular vote, it was nonetheless a plurality: Kim Young-sam of the Democratic Party received 28.0%, Kim Dae-jung of the Party for Peace and Democracy received 27.1%, and Kim Jong-pil of Democratic Republican Party received only 18.1%. The three-way split among the opposition candidates inevitably delivered the victory to the ruling party candidate.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> presidential election on December 18, 1992, the long-time opposition candidate Kim Young-sam won the election with 42.0%, while the rival candidate Kim Dae-jung received only 33.8%, and Chung Ju-young—the head of the business conglomerate Hyundai Group—received only 16.3%. In 1991, the ruling Democracy and Justice Party had merged with Kim Young-sam’s United Democratic Party and Kim Jong-pil’s party, creating a three-party coalition. Thus, the coalition candidate was able to defeat the opposition candidates. That election was the most open and democratic in the history of Korean presidential elections, but the campaign required an enormous amount of campaign funding, which in turn led to political corruption and scandals.

The 15<sup>th</sup> presidential election on December 18, 1997 was decided on the issues of Korean reunification, economic and social reform, and foreign policy issues. The government party, which was extremely faction-ridden and conservative, chose Lee Hoi-chang as its candidate, while the opposition party chose as its candidate Kim Dae-jung, who was more liberal and willing to negotiate with North Korea rather than continuing the confrontation between two Koreas. Public opinion was sharply divided. However, a third candidate, Lee In-je, emerged as a formidable opponent by breaking away from the ruling party, thus laying the groundwork for the three-way race that led to the defeat of Lee Hoi-chang. Kim Dae-jung won with 40.3% of the vote, while Lee Hoi-chang received 38.7% and Lee In-je only 19.2%.

### **Roh Moo-hyun as Liberal and Reformist**

South Korea elected Roh Moo-hyun, a liberal and human-rights lawyer, as its 16th president on December 18, 2002—an earth-shaking event in the history of South Korean presidential elections. This election revealed that the conservative voting bloc now held fewer South Korean voters than the liberal and

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progressive voting bloc. Younger voters in their 20s, 30s, and 40s now accounted for more than 60% of the population, while those in their 60s and 70s accounted for only 30%. The younger generation tends to be more liberal and progressive than the older generation. According to one public opinion poll, 34.8% of South Koreans considered themselves moderate-center, while 34.0% considered themselves progressive, and only 31.3% considered themselves conservative. By this measure, less than one-third of South Korea is conservative.

Mr. Roh was the candidate of the governing Millennium Democratic Party. He campaigned on the promise that he would continue engagement with North Korea, despite its threatening nuclear program and quirky, recalcitrant diplomacy. He forcefully ruled out any possibility of economic sanctions to compel impoverished North Korea to respect its international obligations. Roh Moo-hyun rode on a wave of huge anti-American demonstrations to his electoral victory. He is likely to set South Korea and the United States on divergent diplomatic paths, following half a century of close alliance and cooperation.

Mr. Roh's main rival, Lee Hoi-chang -- a staunchly conservative former Supreme Court justice who lost narrowly to Kim Dae-jung in the 1997 presidential election -- said during the campaign that South Korea should suspend its assistance to North Korea until North Korea cooperated on a host of issues, ranging from arms control to the reunion of families separated since the Korean War. But the South Korean voters did not support his hard-line stance towards North Korea.

Mr. Roh, 56, was an attractive candidate to younger South Korean voters, while the conservative Mr. Lee, 67, was seen as being much too close to Washington, which was not in favor with most Koreans. During the presidential election campaign, South Korea was swept up in a wave of anti-Americanism. This sentiment was created in part by President George Bush, who

linked North Korea with Iraq and Iran as part of an “axis of evil.” The U.S.-ROK relations were further strained when an armored vehicle operated by two American soldiers inadvertently killed two South Korean schoolgirls in a military training exercise. When the soldiers were acquitted of causing the deaths through negligence, the U.S. military court ruling sparked widespread demonstrations across South Korea.

While some of Roh’s supporters have called for a withdrawal of American troops, President Roh will not go that far. He advocates an equal partnership in Korean-American relations, responding to demands from the younger generation for more independence and equality. Roh insists on a revision of the defense treaty with the United States, although he adds that he will work closely with Washington to resolve the crisis over the North Korean nuclear weapons.

The new cabinet members appointed by President Roh following his inauguration in February 2003 were the most reform-minded individuals governing the ROK in the past half century. Additionally, a much younger generation of Koreans is represented in President Roh’s Cabinet than in any previous cabinet. An example is the 46-year-old female civilian lawyer, Mrs. Kang, appointed to the post of Minister of Justice despite vociferous opposition from the old-guard prosecutors and judges. The question is whether or not these new cabinet ministers can make changes in a higher civil service that is fundamentally conservative and status-conscious. The conservative older generation is not likely to comply with the restructuring of the bureaucracy, nor implement reform policies passed on to them from the hierarchical structure guided by the Blue House.

In contrast to the authoritarian regimes under Generals Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, in an open democratic society bureaucracy tends to cling to inertia and can hardly answer the call for restructuring and reform by the new leadership. It was in

this manner that the reforms demanded by Kim Dae-jung's government failed in their early phases, bogging down in many minor issues. Similarly, radical changes in administrative structure may require a slower process to be sustained throughout Mr. Roh's term of presidency.

## **Conclusion**

It is the conclusion of this chapter that Mr. Roh Moo-hyun was elected with a disproportionate support from the generation of Koreans in their 20s and 30s. As a show of gratitude and recognition of the rising importance of the 386 generation in Korean politics, Mr. Roh drew many of his first and second cabinet members from a younger generation of administrators. The twin goals of Mr. Roh's administration are to execute a comprehensive restructuring of government administration and to reform South Korea's economic system. Some observers fear that Mr. Roh's government is moving too fast toward left-wing socialism. However, recent policy announcements by the Roh administration indicate that the government's reform program is by no means radical or drastic in nature. It is a middle-of-the-road program similar to the American Democratic Party policy or the British Labor Party platform.

Despite some initial jitters, the Korean business community also breathed a sigh of relief. Confronted with slowing economic growth, slackening foreign investment, rising oil prices, and an uncertain international climate including the North Korean nuclear issue, President Roh has done the smart thing: he pushes for change, but not too much nor too fast. Mr. Roh may indeed carry out his campaign promise to restructure the government and reform the economy, but it will be a measured process taking a long period of time. It may take the whole term of his presidency. ☙